

Bluebird Nest Box Project Takes Flight at Harbor Park

By Nancy Feagans

In the Fall of 2007, Dick Purvis decided to conduct an experiment. Armed with one of his homemade Bluebird nest boxes and a long telescoping pole with a wire basket attachment, he set out for Ken Malloy/Harbor Regional Park. Dick had a theory: just like he had so successfully demonstrated in Orange County, if you provide a place for Bluebirds to nest in LA County, they will come. He hung the nest from a high branch in a Shamel Ash tree at the southwest end of the park. Then he waited. Last Spring, his hypothesis proved correct: a pair of Bluebirds occupied the nest box and raised a family of five nestlings!

The Bluebirds were first noticed by Martin Byhower, who wondered who the "guerrilla bluebird-nestboxer" could be. Soon, many folks were enjoying the park's bluebirds, and then the pair obliged by producing and fledging a second set of offspring! Once Martin finally found out about and contacted Dick to thank him, he asked if it would be possible to establish a breeding colony at the park. The idea took off: A Bluebird Nest Box Project Team was formed, with Dan Lee and I as Project Coordinators and Liz Kennedy as Project Volunteer.

We all eagerly looked forward to acting as nest box monitors for the Project. At a recent Board meeting, the Board of Directors voted to purchase a total of 14 Bluebird nest boxes, three baskets, and three poles from Dick Purvis, who, over the last 20 years, has refined the art of crafting these boxes and the tools with which to hang them.

In early September, Dan Lee received the boxes, painted all a light blue, and stenciled a unique number on each. The number will help us as we record information pertinent to each individual box. It was decided to place four of the boxes at Chadwick School and 10 at Harbor Park. Martin took the lead, hanging the Chadwick nest boxes first; a week later, on Sunday morning October 12th, a group comprised of Dan and I, Liz, Martin and Eileen, and Dick, met at the park to hang the remaining 10 nest boxes.

Dick held a brief Bluebird Nest Box Seminar in which he addressed all the considerations involved when embarking on a project such as this. Once we felt we had a grasp of the information and were ready to start hanging boxes, an interruption by way of a rare bird sighted by Martin in the adjacent Shamel Ash trees caused quite a bit of excitement! The bird in question was identified by Martin as a first year fall male Bay-breasted Warbler, extremely rare for this area. Bay-breasted Warblers inhabit boreal coniferous forests in a broad band across central and eastern Canada, wintering in Panama and northern South America. After several minutes of observation and pictures, we decided it was time to get back to the business at hand. (Perhaps the reason we saw the bird was our good Bluebird Boxing Karma?)

Starting at the southwest area, we began working our way through the park, hanging one box after another. There was more to this effort than we at first realized. First, we had to choose the right kind of tree, far enough away from the other trees with nest boxes to allow adequate territory for Bluebird pairs. The tree must have adequate cover, yet be open enough to allow the Bluebirds to come and go easily. Deciduous trees that shed leaves were avoided, as cover and protection from the sun are vital. We must find a branch sturdy enough to accommodate the box, which is fairly heavy, and it must be high enough to discourage access by vandals.

Once the right tree is found and the proper branch identified, the lifting can begin. A nest box is placed in the removable basket, the basket is attached to the end of the telescoping pole, and the box is lifted into place, telescoping the pole as necessary to reach the preferred branch. Sometimes this meant the pole was extended up to as much as 20 feet in length, requiring a real knack for balancing the pole and exercising control over the swaying basket. The next step is making sure the hook on top of the box is securely on the branch, and the entry hole faces the outside of the tree canopy.

As boxes were successfully hung, Liz Kennedy entered the GPS coordinates of each location into an application on her iPhone. The results will be pin-pointed locations on a map of the park, which may then be printed out so that we can easily find the 10 trees with the boxes, and come Spring, monitor the nesting activities and progress of clutches of eggs through hatching and fledging of the young.

There is work to be done prior to Spring, however. Once a month, we will check each box, looking for things like bee or wasp nests that must be removed, or evidence that other species such as House Sparrows might be taking over the box. We'll also note the presence of eggs. If we determine the eggs are House Sparrow rather than Bluebird, steps will be taken to render the eggs infertile, and once the House Sparrows move on, the infertile eggs will be removed and discarded.

The excellent reference book *The Bluebird Monitor's Guide* by Cynthia Berger has been a great help as we familiarize ourselves with the many aspects of Bluebird nesting. Thanks to Martin for pointing us to this book! And many thanks to Dick Purvis for his help and guidance in launching this Project, and providing copies of the log sheet he developed for recording nest box information. We hope to see at least three and possibly more of the nest boxes occupied by Bluebirds next Spring, and look forward to an increase in the Bluebird population at KMHRP.